Mervyn Dinnen 0:06

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Mervyn Dinnen 1:06

On this episode of the HR Means Business Podcast, I'm very excited to be speaking to a keynote speaker and researcher who I had the pleasure of seeing speak a couple of years ago at a conference, and I found what he had to say not not only inspiring, but also interesting, deeply thought and researched. I couldn't wait to get him on the podcast. So, I apologize, it's taken a couple of years, but his name is Ronan Harrington, he is a keynote speaker. I'll get him to introduce himself in a moment. But the areas that he's particularly strong on are sustainable, high-performance organizations, the role of leadership, resilience and mental health and well being as well. So I'm looking forward to a pretty rounded open conversation today. Ronan, would you like to introduce yourself?

Ronan Harrington 1:58

Thanks Mervyn, yeah, I appreciate that. It's a really kind intro, yeah. I'm Ronan Harrington. I work with a lot of the number ones and number twos in most industry categories, and they come to me to try and understand, is there, or could there be a win-win between productivity and impact and revenue growth on one side, and well being and resilience on the other? And I, you know my approach, which I've you know, Mervyn saw me speak a couple of years ago, that I've been refining each time I work with a new client, is that there is a win-win and there is a new North Star that I would call sustainable high performance. So yeah, very excited to discuss with you today.

Mervyn Dinnen 2:35

I suppose, for a little bit of background, how did you, I suppose, not move into this area, but how did this area of performance, resilience really capture you and your speaking and researching?

Ronan Harrington 2:48

Well, I'm a bit of a cautionary tale, and the reason that this means a lot to me, particularly the resilience side of things, is that I didn't have the knowledge at the time, and I was in my own senior leadership positions. So you know, before I was working in the corporate world as a keynote speaker, I was a futurist of the British Foreign Office. I wrote a report on the world of 2030 and how the British government should respond. So it's very interesting to see how the predictions are playing out in this particular moment. I had good senior leadership positions in activism and politics. And I think really was when I was in the crucible of, kind of being in the national media and really facing extreme levels of stress and burnout that, you know, I committed the cardinal sins of burnout. You know, I didn't know how to stop pushing through and plowing on and white knuckling it, and unfortunately for me, that, you know, led to a really significant health crisis that, unfortunately, I'm still in six years later. And so on that journey, as you can imagine, when you're really taking this to the to the depth of suffering, that's when you really learn about resilience. You know, you can teach only so much online. It's when you're in that dark night of the soul that you truly understand what it means to be confronted at the deepest level and to still find a way through. I started, you know, and obviously Mervyn, you heard me. I, you know, I share my personal story sometimes, and what it taught me about resilience. I was just very interested in, like, what that looks like in a corporate setting. Like, what does deep levels of resilience look like when the going gets tough? What does a high performance culture look like that embodies the principles of resilience? And, you know, it's one of those ones where an offering meets a real need in the market. The people we're crying out for. There has to be a different way of working that isn't burning our people out, disengaging them, leading to high rates of attrition and just low productivity. And so, for the last number of years, I'd like to think of the forefront of the research and the thinking on what that looks like.

Mervyn Dinnen 4:56

I suppose if I start with my performance, it's an expression which is used a lot, but most organizations I come across see themselves as high performing, or they want to be high performing. How would you define a high performing organization?

Ronan Harrington 5:12

A high performing organization has intrinsic standards of excellence that every member of the team, you've created a culture where every person in the team has a really strong, ongoing conversation about who they are and what they want to achieve in life. There's a values and a purpose alignment of what the organization is doing, and the organization is cultivating that fire within so that they're here ultimately to do the best work of their lives. That's ultimately what we all want. We all want the joy and the camaraderie of being at the top of our game. And it's not a game that is defined by my boss's standards of excellence, which often is the mistake I think a lot of leaders make in high performing organizations. So you're going to walk through this door. This is a high performance organization, we have high standards of excellence. You're here to meet them. I think that's actually, it's a ruse. It's not the right way to do it. It's about everyone having their own high standards of excellence and encouraging it out of each other. And so that, really, for me, is the essence, and that's actually a way to distinguish between whether an organization is high performing. They can knock it out of the park revenue wise, but you can feel it in the room. I think is the best way of understanding, are these people on fire? Are they here to do the best work of their lives? So that's my own take on what high performance is.

Mervyn Dinnen 6:34

So are you saying you see it as more of a cultural thing, possibly?

Ronan Harrington 6:40

I mean, there's many dimensions to high performance, but I think ultimately it is a cultural thing. It's about, you know, and again, you know, this isn't rocket science, you know, there is a kind of a formula, in general, for high performance. I think that, you know, like everything from, you know, the very foundational level, is there a culture of trust through deepening levels of psychological safety? Is there a culture of candor where we can address conflict? Is there a culture of responsibility and accountability so that we're held to account on our shared commitments? And is there an obsession about results? They're kind of like ,at a very broad level, the kind of things you see in a high performance organization, I think that the shift that I'm seeing is that with a greater emotional intelligence that is happening in the corporate world because of a deeper understanding of mental health, and, you know, our internal worlds, it's about what a deeper level of performance looks like when you really speak to and tend to that, that inner dimension. I think that's the thing that's new that I really try and focus on, because, in a way, you implement all of those things. But if you haven't done the inner work as a leader, and if there isn't a culture where people can be open and vulnerable and be human with each other, on some level, it's always missing the mark somewhat, and it's always not quite as as excellent as it could be. I would say, fundamentally, it's a cultural issue, and underneath that, culture is a whole hidden world of psychology and even spirituality, like the deepest realms of our being. I think that really great organizations have created a culture that respect our personal boundaries. And as you know, a degree of professionalism and decorum, of course, and also there is a willingness to kind of reveal more of ourselves, to connect on a deeper level. That actually is, you know, the hidden magic. And you know, often the parallel that is drawn is with sports teams. You know, they're kind of exemplars of high performance. We borrow a lot of sporting analogies. We try and express high performance in the corporate setting. The bond between the team is very deep. It's a very deep bond they, you know, they would move mountains for each other. There's a real degree of vulnerability and openness, even in you could say, like, classically macho environments. When I speak to organizations, I often think that the leaders are looking for like, if we could borrow that magic, if we could have that magic in our rooms, what would it look like? And I think that there's many dimensions to that. There's like, feeling like you're on an inspiring mission, that it's worth giving the extra effort for this, but fundamentally, I always come back to this idea that it's actually draining to be mediocre; even though it's sometimes easier, and we want to take the foot off the pedal. Where we really get our life force energy is when we're giving ourselves fully to something that we care about, That requires, I think, a more intimate form of leadership and a more intimate form of culture where we're really going underneath the surface as to what truly drives people and bringing that out in them.

Mervyn Dinnen 9:56

Where do you see leaders sometimes going wrong on this?

Ronan Harrington 10:01

Well, I think that ultimately, you know, the biggest problem that any leaders face, and all employees face, is excessive workload. We are just so overwhelmed by the digital avalanche of tasks that we need to do to advance the business, to coordinate actions. That that kind of volume of tasks takes up so much of our bandwidth that a: we, you know, can it can skew our notion of productivity, and we can get lost in feeling like we're being productive and busy, when actually we're not advancing the core objectives of the business. But also, b. we're too obsessed with the "what" and not with the "how." I think really good leaders really tend to the invisible how. How are we working together? What's the dynamic within the team? That's the context from which performance arises. When I'm working with and when I'm coaching, let's say SVPs of Fortune 500 companies, or I'm working with the industry leaders, I'm really, actually getting quite forensic. And I'm saying, like, "show me your diary. I'll show you my diary if you show me yours," because I want to see the degree to which you are scheduling in time, not just that your diary reflects the strategic priorities and the task priorities, but the relational priorities. Who in your team has been kind of underperforming, but I'm kind of too busy to have the conversation or it's a bit awkward. then you just hope they'll get it together, rather than sitting down with them and really diagnosing, like, what is the root cause of this under performance? Like, what's going on in your life, what your individual needs and preferences when it comes to learning and growing here and taking that time to slow down tending to the relational field. It's always the thing that is under prioritized in organizations, because, in a way, the feedback loop on that is longer. If you don't do the urgent task that needs to be done this week, you better be sure you're going to know about it as a deliverer, whereas if I'm tending to the garden, to the culture, if I'm not actually picking out the weeds of toxic behavior, if I'm not planting these new seeds of inspiration, I can kind of get away with that. It's all kind of the invisible work of leadership. So, I think that if I was to give a high level recommendation for any leader is: really make sure that the how we're working together is reflected in your diary, because, you know, what gets scheduled gets done. I'm just curious to ask you, Mervyn, like, you know, you've interviewed many great people on the podcast. Like, where, in relation to this topic, where do you see leaders go wrong? Or indeed, like, what, what you think is the right way to fuel a high performance?

Mervyn Dinnen 12:54

It's interesting you're throwing that one back on me. I think where leaders sometimes go wrong is to maybe misjudge the situation, misjudge the culture within the organization. They maybe believe that there is a culture that possibly isn't reflected there. I mean, we've all worked in organizations where, you know, we as I suppose, the workers can feel the culture, but maybe leaders managers see it quite differently. I think that's possibly where the people, particularly leaders who are very driven and focused, and believe: this is the organization,this is what we do, sometimes lose sight of how that has filtered down throughout the workforce, whether the people in the organization are as committed to that vision as they are. That, I suppose, leads me into, I won't say, the middle section, but human resources, you know, what kind of role have they got to play in creating this high performance organization?

Ronan Harrington 14:05

I, you know what? I think it's really tricky for HR leaders, because so much of this resilience, high performance is at a cultural behavioral level. And of course, there are interventions you can do from a centralized HR perspective. You know, if I want to create a culture of Kaizen, of continuous improvement, obsession over quality, high performance, you know, I would look to Adobe's check-in system that has really moved the conversation beyond the kind of biannual review to something that's much more live and immediate. And you know, if I want to think about employee well being in the most holistic way that's connected to productivity, Salesforce is an incredible example of something that is integrated. So there are these examples of initiatives that, you know, there is good evidence behind them. There's good case studies that can be replicated, but often, you know, and I would say HR leaders are my primary client that bring me in. Often what I think the problem they're facing is, is that they're in a high performing organization in an industry that is subject to a lot of disruption in terms of shifting consumer preferences, the regulatory landscape, AI; there's a lot of big pivots happening, and there's a lot of restructuring. They are tasked by the executive to create, you know, the people agenda behind that: the skills transition, the behavioral transition. They're in the middle between a team leader who is already up to their eyeballs, stressed delivering for today, and now they have to pivot and adapt for tomorrow. So they're experiencing change fatigue. They're quite like everyone, not necessarily set in their own ways, but they have a particular method and formula for how they lead teams, and HR are coming in and saying, "actually, you need to now shift in this direction." There can be a lot of resistance to that, not because the ideas are bad, but because they're busy and they've got competing commitments. I think the most effective thing that a HR team can do is identify amongst the cadre of team leaders, now it depends on how big your organization is, but like, who are the potential early adopters? Who are the people who are, generally speaking, they've got quite a high level of growth mindset? They're open minded people. There's already a good foundation in the team. What would it look like to introduce the pilot of our new ways of working? Because essentially, that's what it is. It's new ways of working. How could we use a pilot,three or four or five leaders, who we have a fair assumption that they will implement it at the best of their ability, they'll give time for it, so that we can demonstrate the success of this. It kind of ripples out through word of mouth. This new ways of working framework isn't just the latest document from HR that we have to read and do, it feels more like a grassroots organic change is taking place in the organization. It all comes down to relationships and what it looks like to keep our ear to the ground. You know, you talked about the perception gap between senior leadership and and the lived experience on the ground. And in a way, HR have always been the intermediary between them. They're often stationed in both rooms and and so I think that, you know, with any kind of initiatives that are around significantly changing our ways of working to encourage high performance, there ultimately needs to be a piloting, experimentation concept that isn't just statistical. It's actually to show other people, because we're ultimately going to take we are influenced by the role modeling of our peers. So, if I'm in a department and their team is like, "they're doing so well and there's a great vibe, I will naturally be influenced by that," rather than HR sending me an email saying, "here's our new ways of working. The template, the training is on next month's agenda. Can you come to that?" You're just like, oh, another thing. I don't want to do it. So, I think that it's more complex when you get into very high-skilled organizations, but the underlying principles are the same, we want a good news story, but a new way of working, coming from the grassroots and then spreading horizontally.

Mervyn Dinnen 18:36

Yeah, a lot of people, I think, mix, mix up high performance and achieving high performance results, with over-energy and overworking. So what I suppose I'm interested in, because it the things like resilience, and particularly for individual mental health and well being, if they feel that they're in an organization which is striving for this, these levels of performance, where is the backup? Where is the, I suppose, the moments to say, look, I'm really struggling with this today. Or because people won't say that, because they'll think that there'll be mark down, or, you know, there'll be a mark against them somewhere; Do you come across that?

Ronan Harrington 19:26

I think what you're pointing to, and this is a wonderful phrase that I got from the CEO of Mycelium, Michael Matania but is essentially endurance culture. Legacy corporate culture is "push through, plow on. White knuckling high-performance equals stamina and sacrifice," but more subtly, it essentially is a culture where people are going over their capacity habitually. And you know, the the stats and burnout, if we just take one dimension of this mental health, is that, you know, we know we have a limited capacity. Human beings have limited mental and physical capacity. That equation of people habitually pushing themselves beyond their capacity, the feedback loop, it will ultimately come back to haunt the person and the team in terms of low performance. And I think that, it still surprises me, even in this kind of general age of awareness about burnout, how so many companies or pockets of parts of the company are still in this endurance mindset. And I get it, like I understand why there's a lot of pressure to deliver when the only way is through. But increasingly, there's a really big emphasis on a smarter way to approach this. You know, the underlying principle of sustainable high performance, to make it as simple as possible is: it's a cadence of peak exertion and renewal. It's just like we see in sports teams, they have an on season, they have an off season. They train hard and they rest so they can recover. It's the underlying principle. It's very simple, and yet, in the moment, we're caught up in the anxiety that our sprawling to do list gives us, we're also addicted to the dopamine hit of continuously delivering tasks. It's something that we're very much entangled in. And then, crucially, I think this is just to kind of respond directly to the point you're making is that we have a, kind of a narrative, you know, I'll often, you know, hear this in about company, off sites of, you know, I know last year was a grueling year financially, but we just about did it. Now we're going from this base camp of Mount Everest to here, and there's the kind of the CEO exec narrative. You can see, and you can read on people's faces are just like, oh my god, I'm exhausted. And so I'm generally happy with that kind of incremental, ambitious growth agenda, as long as there's a method that actually it plays out in reality about what people's capacity are, and the foundation of that is trust and psychological safety, and what we have to you know, there's a very important theory in the clinical literature from Robert Kegan at Harvard, is this idea of competing commitments. So, if you're in an organization, and a good way of actually measuring this is like, if a person checks in with themselves, they're going beyond their capacity. They're really, you know, kind of running on fumes, and they So, like that would be the moment where you speak to your team leader, you have a discussion as a team. That should be like a totally normal thing to do, however, if they have a competing commitment that says something like, Well, I'm up for promotion in six months or nine months, if I'm going to be the one to put my hand up and say I'm burnt out, what if I don't get that promotion? What if I'm devalued in the team? So that's a really good kind of internal individual barometer, because if that competing commitment is there, realistically, they're going to stay quiet. And so I think that the tightrope that leaders have to walk is that, yes, they set a really high performing agenda, and there's high standards of excellence, and there's ambitious growth targets. Fine. There is a method for doing it that makes sense. And this is why the industry leaders will ask me to come in and explain what the method is. And then, crucially, that there is a general culture of humanness and openness, where if for any reason, whether it's stuff going on in your personal life, you could be going through a personal crisis or the workload is simply unreasonable, but by anyone's standards, that you're able to voice that, and there is a reallocation of resources, a reallocation of workload and the support. And I think that third dimension is where the rubber hits the road. Because if you don't have that culture of trust, where people can open up, even when they sit with the internal consequences of, Oh, I really hope this doesn't affect my promotion, like a good manager can, can a. they should be able to read it. I mean, it's written all over our faces. They should be able to read it and say, hey, just want to check out with you. You look quite stressed, like, quite exhausted, like, how are you doing? And by the way, like, I know you're on a track to go from senior associate to partner, just to say, like that, we can have this conversation. And I want you to feel safe that that's not going to undermine that progression. We ultimately want you to be at your best when you hit that partner level. We don't want you burning out before that. So for me, that's what I feel are the ingredients of how to get it right.

Mervyn Dinnen 24:16

Bringing it back slightly to HR again, what role can they play? I mean, how can they keep, I mean, are they the ear to the ground? Are they the people who possibly, you know, you said that it's HR people who usually bring you in to talk or consult with the organization. Is that because they can see things possibly not running the way they should, or because they feel themselves a bit overwhelmed? What tends to be the motive?

Ronan Harrington 24:42

Well, I think that it's interesting that you mentioned this. You know, this idea that they feel the most overwhelmed, often find that, and it does play out in the data that like levels of burnout and difficulties that HR teams are facing. They're also, I think, more emotionally intelligent, and I think that there is a greater level of sensitivity to what's going on in the room, in the organization, in their bodies, which you know, can play a factor in it. I think that ultimately, you know, it depends on the scale and the structure of the organization. But you know, what we really want to see is organizations having a really sophisticated data collection system, so we can get a real live reading of what is the resilience factor of this team versus this team? And you know, a good HR leader should have a dashboard of all the different departments and teams, and kind of be able to see in a traffic light system, this team is in trouble. This team is heading to trouble, and we're going to pour our human resources into shoring that up and into improving it. If you know you're getting a general bad reading across the company as a whole, whether it comes to engagement levels, productivity levels, resilience levels, that they make a very compelling case that is the right mixture of, you know, this is, this is something you need to take seriously, and this is the investment opportunity, and they're able to speak in financial terms to build the case for giving the team the support it needs to do the work it does. So I think that, you know, my sense is that it's also relational it's also this ability to combine the data that presents the picture that moves people, especially financially and relationally, they're able to secure buy in, they have influence in the organization, that people see them as an ally and that they're willing to adopt the latest initiative, not because the board told them to do it, because actually aligns my priorities, my interest and having good job satisfaction and a decent level of well being with the business objectives. So that's kind of my sense of, positioning wise, I think how an HR team needs to position itself for success and what it needs to do.

Mervyn Dinnen 24:42

Do you think people analytics are key to this? Or do you think, for HR, it's more about just checking in with people on a regular basis to see how they're feeling and how things are going?

Ronan Harrington 27:28

I'm gonna annoy you by saying the answer is both. Again, it depends.

Mervyn Dinnen 27:31

 I thought it might be.

Ronan Harrington 27:34

But maybe, just to say that, you know, there's cold data and there's warm data. The cold data is the pulse surveys. It is creating a kind of a coherent picture. It's invaluable being able to do that temperature check, to talk to people. In a way, there's, there's a level below of candor about what's really going on that will never be revealed in a survey. And so it's important to make take the time for those one-to-one check-ins where you're really, over time, developing that trust, mutual trust, and the ability to be a bit more open, a bit more vulnerable with each other, to discover what's truly going on. Because you know, inevitably, you know, one of the biggest barriers to high performance and drivers of burnout is toxic behavior. That often is the thing that people are most uncomfortable to speak about because of the reputational consequences. The person in question might have very low levels of emotional intelligence. They might have no capacity to actually respond to it if we bring it up. And you know, being able to surface that and to really address that is really important and could come out in a survey. It's more likely to come out when you're having a really good conversation and there's a level of trust that I can bring this to you, and that's always going to be in person.

Mervyn Dinnen 28:53

Ronan, we're coming to the end of the conversation. It's been fascinating talking to you and learning from you, and hopefully people listening can see why I said at the beginning, you're one of the most impressive keynote speakers I've seen for some time. How can people connect with you? I know you're fairly busy on LinkedIn. I know you share quite a lot of interesting thoughts and ideas on things. In fact, a Gen Z piece recently, which I interacted with you on, I haven't even asked you a question on Gen Z. Maybe I should actually before we go. What's your perception of how, I suppose, the incoming workforce are feeling about things like high performance?

Ronan Harrington 29:35

Oh, I think they're likely to roll their eyes at the idea in their respective, you know, groups that they're in online outside of work. I think that there's so many lazy stereotypes about Gen Z that don't play out. So what is kind of framed as Gen Z or entitled Gen Z are soft and lazy. I think a better reframing of this is that they have a set of values from growing up in a completely different age where there's so much more awareness of mental health, there's also been so much more testing of mental health because of the social media they've been raised in. And so they have a set of values around the kind of life that they want that is so far beyond the endurance culture, pensionable job. You know, there are people that kind of see themselves as having many jobs, ones that allow them flexibility, ones that allow them to have autonomy and connect to purpose, even though these are human needs that all of us have. I mean, I'm a millennial, and I identify with all of that. But what's kind of different is that there's, and I would describe this, and I did describe this in the Gen Z piece that was featured on LinkedIn news, is that they have values-based boundaries. They actually have boundaries that they're willing to explicitly communicate. They have non-negotiables that are a bit confronting to organizations. So they're like, who are you? You just joined the organization a year ago, and you're 24 or what? Shut up. You know, it's interesting, you know, I also wrote a post today about the leaked audio from Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase. You know, he was kind of against people who are on zoom but are like, emailing at the same time, or you can't even reach them on a Friday. And I do think there is an interesting conversation around work ethic, a kind of a competitive zeal that I think is harnessed in the kind of the pre-COVID era of being in person, the accountability that happens when you're in person versus when you're at home. I think, I think all of us can identify with that idea of, like, having a bit of a slacking off day when we're at home and no one's around. I mean, it would make sense. Obviously, there's technology systems that can measure your productivity, but that doesn't really measure the degree to which you're giving it everything. So I also think that I'm very much someone who tries to hold both perspectives, like, I think there might be something in the work ethic and the zeal in particular, and its relationship to a particular corporate culture, in person culture, and like, you know, you don't make it into a high performing organization as a Gen Z person if you don't already, on some level, have an attitude of excellence. If we're talking about the clients that I work with, you don't make it in the door. So in a way, like, who are we talking about when we talk about Gen Z, soft and title maybe in some companies. But I like to think that we should assume, if you're in a high performing organization, that you've hired someone that's high performing. I mean, why? Why would you be hiring someone that isn't high performing? If you're calling yourself a high performing organization. That sounds absurd, and rather to understand, okay, like you wouldn't any team be like, Okay, what are your drivers? What motivates you? Okay, clearly, you need a lot of flexibility. This work needs to feel purposeful. How do I work with that, rather than be like, That's not how we did it, and then dismissing it as a lazy with stereotype. So as ever, in this polarized era, it's an invitation for nuance, looking for nuance people, please. You can connect with me. I'm on LinkedIn talking about this kind of stuff every day. Ronan Harrington, you can search for me on LinkedIn. Feel free to connect or follow me. And then my website is kind of where a lot of my thought leadership is, and the keynotes that I give and videos of me speaking, and that's https://www.ronanharrington.co.

Mervyn Dinnen 33:28

Ronan, it's been an absolute pleasure. I've enjoyed the conversation and, well, I look forward to meeting up with you again at a conference some stage soon.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai